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ON THE PRE-CONDITIONS OF BEGINNING A DISCOURSE ON MATTERS IN AFRICA

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Abstract: What are the pre-conditions of making truth claims about phenomena in Africa? In this article I seek to outline a few basic presuppositions, which have enabled discourses on matters in Africa, making them coincide with something real by creating and reconfiguring their referents, while rendering others invisible. From a perspective influenced by my training in the history and anthropology of Africa in Paris, I particularly deal with the lasting impact of Enlightenment thought, cultural and functionalist anthropology and the ideas of French colonial officials. An examination of how the overdeterminations of the object "Africa" could be escaped involves an assessment of the ideas of Valentin Y. Mudimbe, Jean-Loup Amselle, Achille Mbembe and Johannes Fabian.

Keywords: Idea of Africa, epistemology, ethnological reason, liberalism, colonialism.

As part of a collective endeavour trying to come to terms with a diversity of social, cultural and political processes *in* Africa, this contribution seeks to deal with what exists *before* we start to discuss these realities.[1] Michel Foucault's reflexions as he began his inaugural lecture at the College de France in 1970 famously raised the issue of how beginning a discourse somehow always involves speaking within pre-existing institutional power relations.[2] One could extend this argument by considering that discourses not only bear the weight of institutional spaces, but also suffer from a particular over-determination

[1] I stress the difference between the homogenizing expression "African realities" and the idea that different realities exist in a geographical or political space called Africa.

[2] In Foucault's imaginary dialogue "[d]esire says: 'I should not like to enter this risky order of discourse; I should not like to be involved in its peremptoriness and decisiveness; I should like it to be all around me like a calm, deep transparence, infinitely open, where others would fit in with my expectations, and from which truths would emerge one by one; I should only have to let myself be carried, within it and by it, like a happy wreck.' The institution replies: 'You should not be afraid of beginnings; we are all here in order to show you that discourse belongs to the order of laws, that we have long been looking after its appearances; that a place has been made ready for it, a place which honours it but disarms it; and that if discourse may sometimes have some power, nevertheless it is from us and us alone that it gets it'". (Foucault, 1981: 51-52)

when certain objects are at stake. I would argue that, given the nature of their colonial and postcolonial relationships to the North, and their particular role in the emergence of modern thought, the past, present and future of societies in Africa represent such an over-determined object of knowledge. It therefore seems particularly necessary to enquire into the pre-conditions of making truth claims about phenomena in Africa. In this respect we may ask: How did the idea of Africa as a starting point to question and represent reality emerge? Which fields of knowledge and which ideas were associated with it? How has this knowledge informed colonial and postcolonial political policies, as well as the work of scholars in and on societies in Africa?

These questions are by no means new, considering that during the last half century thinking about the epistemic object "Africa" has given rise to a considerable body of work by sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers, literary scholars and historians both in the West and in Africa. Rather than providing an overview of these efforts – a project that could well form the topic of a book yet to be published – I limit myself to selectively drawing from some of these endeavours in order to outline a few basic presuppositions, which have enabled discourses on matters in Africa, made them coincide with something real by creating and reconfiguring their referents, while rendering others invisible. These presuppositions are in themselves historical constructions, which, if we follow Jean Bazin's vision of "a sociology of narrative production", can be considered to be part of a succession of narratives that respond to a corresponding series of enunciative contexts (2008: 272). The following discussion presents an attempt to provide a brief outline of some of the most significant links in this chain. However, such a project faces two additional difficulties: on the one hand, the significance of each of the links changes according to its interpretative context; on the other hand, instead of being arranged in a pre-established linear fashion, their articulation in itself always remains problematic and subject to possible revision.[3] The ideas I consider here as prime ingredients in the constitution of "Africa" as an object of knowledge reflect my own training at an African Studies department in France during the 1990s in which the analysis of Enlightenment thought, the history of academic anthropology and the analysis of the ideas of colonial officials featured prominently. This background also explains why in this article I deal with

[3] A prominent example for a debate concerning the articulation, inclusion and exclusion of ideas involved in the making of "Africa" is the so-called "afrocentric" thesis defended by Cheikh Anta Diop (1954). The author delinks ancient Egypt from the Euro-Mediterranean civilization by arguing that it was fundamentally African and attempts to show how societies on the African continent were influenced by it. Similarly, the work of Martin Bernal (1988) deals with African-Egyptian influences on Greek society. While such moves are certainly provocative, in as far as they contest the dominant European historical narrative underpinning its claim to superiority; they also can be understood as re-appropriations of earlier European scientific ideas. In this respect the British diffusionist anthropologist Grafton Elliot Smith (1871-1937) claimed that the Egyptian civilization had had a profound influence on the world. Moreover, both Bernal and Diop reproduce an essentialist model by stressing one set of civilisational exchanges to the detriment of another.

arguments by two academic authors from Africa, who have attracted particular interest on the Parisian scene: the Congolese Valentin Y. Mudimbe and the Cameroonese Achille Mbembe, while leaving aside the contributions of other prominent researchers in the history of ideas on Africa, such as Kwame Anthony Appiah, Paulin Hountounji, Paul Tiyambe Zeleza or Elisio Macamo.

I start with the emergence of Africa in antiquity, its rediscovery in the 15th century and the emergence of an evolutionist discourse in the Enlightenment based on the methods of comparative naturalism. I then deal with the question of how liberal thought and the abolitionist movement led to the justification of 19th century colonialism and provided a stimulus for scientific innovation. A discussion of the inversion of the scientific devaluation of Africa through functionalist and cultural anthropology allows me to consider the lasting impact of the paradigm of comparative naturalism and to think about the conditions for decolonising knowledge on matters in Africa.

1. THE EMERGENCE OF A PLACE, A NAME AND AN OBJECT OF KNOWLEDGE

My starting point is the concluding part of the first chapter of Valentin Mudimbe's book *The Idea of Africa* (1994) dealing with the "naming and metaphorizing" of the continent and its inhabitants. Having previously discussed how in antiquity Africa had been subject to Greek, Roman, Phoenician and Achaemenid descriptions during the first millennium before Christ (in the 6th century A.D. the Phoenician Necos circumnavigated the continent), in this section Mudimbe discusses where the name "Africa" came from and how its significance for Western thought evolved until it became one of the privileged objects of a science named anthropology or ethnology.

For the Romans *Africa* designates one of their provinces, while its inhabitants are called *Afri* or Africani. In technical and literary works Africa may also refer to a third part of the world corresponding to the classical Greek idea of *Lybia*. *Aethiops*, the generic name for dark-skinned people derives from the name of Vulkan's son in Greek mythology. The polysemic designation *Aethiopia* qualifies the continent as a place near the sun which burns people's skin. *Aethiopia* is variously confounded or distinguished from *Lybia* and, as Mudimbe puts it, "by the first century A.D. the continent as a whole has been divided into three main parts by geographers: *Egypt*, *Lybia*, and *Aethiopia*, the last corresponding more or less to sub-Saharan Africa" (1994: 27). In the context of the European explorations in the 15th century the designation *Aethiopia* was replaced by the name *Nigritia*, derived from the Latin word *niger*, which again relates to the skin of people burned by the sun. As Mudimbe notes, at this moment, the word is still neutral in its value. Descriptions by explorers and navigators were done "in the name of difference" and "not necessarily because of an intellectual politics of prejudice" (*ibidem*: 29). What is striking in

16th and 17th century representations is their tendency to "Westernize" others' bodies, while reiterating a principle according to which the differences and particularity of beings and things should be preserved. However, in the last instance such a principle remained firmly rooted in a hierarchising ideology, given that the place of the other within what was to become an international legal order had already been defined since the 15th century through a series of papal declarations or bulls. Based on the concept of "terra nullius" stipulating a European right to sovereignty outside of Europe, and as a corollary, the absence of sovereignty for non-Western polities, the papal philosophy ultimately legitimated the right to colonize and to enslave people. Here we also find the foundation of an argument that informed the idea of a necessary development or *mise en valeur* of the colonies based on the idea that Western man had the duty to make sure that "all goods made by God for the whole of mankind should be exploited" (*ibidem*: 37).

In order to understand the coexistence of a Christian ideology of European expansion with a will to come to terms with difference, we need to grasp the theoretical debates surrounding newly discovered "savages". Such encounters raised the problem of understanding how one could account for the truth of the book of Genesis if humanity did not descend from one people. This question was resolved by hierarchising humans within a natural chain of being in which geographical location accounts for difference. Such a philosophical anthropology, which Mudimbe qualifies as "static", in as far as no historical dynamic of change linking the savage to Western man was observed, can be contrasted with a new paradigm emerging in the 18th century. In it "a strong connection between the African continent and the concept of primitiveness, and thus of savagery" (*ibidem*: 28) is made.

New ideas first introduced by the German philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Leibnitz and Charles Darwin's grandfather, the doctor and botanist Erasmus Darwin suggested that different classes of being, including men and animals, are not only connected, but are also part of a temporal order, in which, according to Darwin, not only all beings undergo transformations, but acquire characteristics which are transmitted to their posterity. While God could still be considered the fabricator of every one of these kinds of being, enlightenment thought gradually introduced a new perspective inspired by René Descartes in which God is the source of natural law and the "world was not 'produced at once in a finished and perfect state,' but came gradually into existence" (Hodgen *apud* Mudimbe,1994: 29). Grounded in the principle of regularity and legality "working uniformly in all times and places" (*ibidem*) this line of thought ultimately provided the epistemic basis for 19th century evolutionist anthropology in which a scale of civilizations places human merits, cultural values and technical progress in an orderly succession from "primitive" societies to modern man. Mudimbe's demonstration on how

the names of Africa came to become metaphors of inferiority, first through static and then evolutionist anthropology, places them into a sequential order. However, one may also consider that the earlier perspective, which engaged with difference through a form of cultural relativism reappeared, both in the 19th and 20th century theories of German cultural anthropology, which sought to retrace (pre-)historical processes of cultural diffusion, and, albeit less obviously, within the colonial project of transforming Africa through a civilising mission.[4]

Reading Mudimbe's reflexions in the *Idea of Africa* and complementing them with his arguments in his earlier and most well-known book *The Invention of Africa* (1988), one understands that the confounding of geographical categories with skin colour, the Papal legitimisation of European expansion along with the way comparative naturalism placed all human phenomena into the common framework of a movement from the primitive to the civilized, while Enlightenment philosophers "defined the characteristics of savagery" (*ibidem*: 72), basically set the stage for the reduction of diversity to a unified analytical object and its depreciation through colonialism and the emerging modern sciences. This however leaves us with the question of how all of this distinguished people in Africa from other parts of the non-Western world, and why Africa was to become the centre of a second wave of European expansion and colonization in the 19th and early 20th century.

2. The "liberation" of Africa and the scientific critique of Enlightenment political theory

In this section I argue that Africa as an emerging object of scientific knowledge and colonial policy cannot be conceived without taking into account its relationship to liberal thought, the movement for the abolition of slavery and the sociological and anthropological critique of Enlightenment political philosophy. François Manchuelle's seminal studies on "The 'Régéneration of Africa'" (1996) and "Origines Républicaines de la politique d'expansion colonial de Jules Ferry" (1988) are useful guides to the relationship between liberalism, abolitionism and colonisation with a clear significance beyond the French context. Manchuelle's basic argument goes as follows: 18th century anti-absolutist Enlightenment thinkers reinterpreted the antique theory of the existence of a "natural law", which was applicable to all societies. They sought to demonstrate that "individual self-interest, the motivation of all human actions, was not only compatible with collective interest but was its foundation – and thus the foundation of natural law" (Manchuelle, 1996: 560). The concept of 'natural' was also invested by an analogical

[4] Similarly, one could argue that while evolutionism breaks with the earlier static vision of creation, it also remains indebted to a Christian idea of time. As Anthony Giddens (1994) has pointed out, the modern idea of progress clearly is related to the idea of eschatology according to which time necessarily flows towards a final moment of salvation.

sense borrowed from the life sciences according to which in its normal state of health a (social) body needed no direction. Absolutism and its economic corollary mercantilism could therefore be considered as an artificial, unnatural state of society and were associated with Oriental despotism, the designation used to qualify the domination exerted at that time by the Ottoman Empire. Given its economic and political implications, such a theory on the negative effects of despotic rule was also used to engage in a critique of the slave trade. According to ideas shared by both Republicans and Christians, the influence of slave trading on African polities had led to a degeneration of their societies and it was a duty of civilised men to support their liberation which would eventually lead to a new order based on free labour. In the case of the Republicans, such scenarios drew from a Rousseauist perspective according to which the natural state of man could be improved by civilization, just as much as the ills of the latter could be corrected by the former. As Manchuelle shows, this line of thought not only provided a rationale for the abolition of slavery, but justified the project of colonising or 'pacifying' African societies by liberating them from despotic regimes.[5] Moreover, the appropriation of Enlightenment liberal ideas also inspired African nationalist thought, either through the idea of creating free States of returned ex-slaves (Sierra Leone and Liberia), or by imagining a post-colonial polity based on a synthesis between what was best in Western civilisation and positive cultural features of traditional Africa, such as the oral tradition and the solidarity of the extended family.[6]

During this gradual emergence of a certain idea of what African societies were (supposed to be) like, its liberalist underpinnings had in themselves been transformed, which again had important consequences for the way historical processes were understood. In this respect, the foundation of modern sociology and anthropology had a crucial role to play. As Marc Abélès discusses in his book *Anthropologie de l'État* (1990) the sociological project was motivated by a critique of what was conceived as an individualist illusion. It was created by a political philosophy according to which society and sovereignty were the result of a social contract among free individuals. Whereas the oldest human societies were characterized by individuals living in a state of nature, legal scholars, sociologists and later anthropologists wanted to demonstrate that, to the

[5] Of course Manchuelle is by no means implying that the colonialist project was not also fuelled by nationalist dynamics and economical interests in a time of heightened competition in the so-called "imperialist" period culminating between the final decades of the 19th century and the beginning of World War I. Here colonialism was the answer to the effects of industrialization, namely the need to open up new markets, find new sources of raw materials and reunite societies divided by class interests, but also a means to secure geopolitical advantages.

[6] The idea of a superior synthesis between modernity and tradition is also a characteristic trait of the different variants of African socialism which emerged in the mid-20th century, defended by leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere or Sekou Badian Kouyaté (Benot, 1969). Here Enlightenment liberal ideas concerning "natural law" could be replaced by Engels' idea of "Ur-kommunismus" (primordial communism) and dialectics.

contrary, the individual of the philosophers was not the beginning but the outcome of a long evolutionary process.

Initially based on an interpretation of biblical, Greek and Roman sources, these arguments became increasingly founded on ethnographic descriptions such as those of so called tribal societies in North Africa and North America. Two basic points of view emerged. The first one, which can be associated with the Scottish legal scholar Henry Maine, stipulated that the origins of social and political organization were to be found in paternal authority and kinship relations. These gradually developed into territorial relationships, which were precursors of the modern, social contract based political regime. A second perspective was developed by the American anthropologist Louis Henry Morgan. According to Morgan, the family was a later development after an original stage of promiscuity and the beginnings of the modern polity and of politics itself lay in the confederations of tribes such as the Iroquois Indians. Common to both cases is the establishment of a more or less pronounced divide between the modern contractual order based on individual's will to engage with each other and its pre-modern counterpart where social relations are fundamentally structured by kinship. This divide not only justified a difference between the respective objects of the anthropologist/ethnologist and the sociologist – the former dealing with kinship based societies, the latter with contract-based one's –, but also informed the way colonial powers conceived their subjects as distinct from metropolitan citizens. To the contrary of what a liberal theory of abolitionism might suggest, the prime object of such knowledge is not the free individual but the status holding member of the kinship, tribal or ethnic group. In his seminal book *Citizens and Subjects* (1996), Mahmood Mamdani usefully summed up the underlying apartheid logic of the various colonial legal orders in Africa through the concept of the "bifurcate state". In every colony a small, often urban minority of settlers or *assimilés* enjoying full civic and political rights was set apart from a mostly rural majority which was held to live under the rule of customary law as represented by religious or tribal authorities.[7]

As Mamdani's reference to apartheid suggests, race was a crucial element in this politico-legal configuration. Informed by 19th century biology and human anthropology, which reformulated and systematized older ideas of difference, race must be seen as the key element which provided a fundamental coherence both to colonial policy and, as we will discuss briefly further below, to its pan-africanist adversaries. To grasp how this

[7] One must however consider that, as he himself has acknowledged, Mamdani's model may be more useful to understand the ideological political-legal blueprints of the late 19th and early 20th century colonial orders, than the actual historical realities on the ground. In this respect economic and political interests led to a situation in which the central state did not always clearly support the power of local traditional authorities and in which customary norms would mix with capitalist market-values, while in rural areas the accumulation strategies of a diversity of local actors along with people's widespread mobility led to "a limited capacity of the state to order the countryside" (Freund, 2000: 104).

played itself out in colonial policy, we can draw from two books by Jean-Loup Amselle on the politics of identity in the French colonial Empire. In the fourth chapter[8] of *Vers un multiculturalisme français. L'empire de la coutume* (1996) the author analyses the thought of Louis Faidherbe, who was the governor general of Senegal, the oldest French colony in Africa, in the mid-nineteenth century. In line with the Republican idea of regeneration mentioned earlier on, Faidherbe developed a theory of colonial policy according to which negro-Africans had a distinct culture which had been deteriorated by the military domination of nomadic groups, such as the Fulbe or Peul. Associated with slavery and trade these groups were promoters of Arab-Muslim civilization and a radical form of Islam, which was distinguished by the French colonial doctrine from the peaceful "black" Islam that had been present in Sub-Saharan Africa for hundreds of years. The aim of colonial expansion and rule was to abolish the domination of "foreigners" in order to allow autochthonous negro-African people to freely develop a society based on agriculture under French protection. Significantly, Faidherbe's racial theory sits uneasily between a rejection of *metissage*, seeking to identify the purest, oldest and therefore most authentic African ethnic groups, and his belief in its positive virtues as source of progress. This ambiguity is also present in his ideas on different races: while clearly being fascinated with negro-Africans he also recognizes their inferiority and draws from ideas in physical anthropology about differences in brain-size, to justify it. As Amselle points out, Faidherbe shaped his model out of his previous experience in Algeria, the first and only large scale French settler colony. Here the *Bureaux Arabes* – an institution created for the study of tribal societies and the development of appropriate policies – elaborated similar distinctions between Arab conquerors and Berber autochthonous people. He also shares with this institution a keen interest for languages and local cultures, which makes Faidherbe an early example of colonial administrator-ethnographers who contributed to the rise of cultural relativism.

The ethnographic curiosity of Faidherbe and other colonial administrators points at a characteristic ambiguity in late 19th century thought on Africa, where evolutionist or primitivist interpretations coexist with a desire to come to terms with local cultures. As we saw earlier on, representations of Africa became increasingly discriminatory and Euro-centric with the rise of the evolutionist paradigm and its racist scientific and anthropological expressions. In the *Invention of Africa* Mudimbe posits that a paradigmatic break with this negative perspective came after World War I in the 1920s (1988: 83), even though earlier exceptions are acknowledged. In the account I have outlined here, such a clear-cut distinction between devaluing and valuing perspectives does not exist. The

[8] The chapter is entitled "Faidherbe: Un raciologue républicain".

ambiguity starts with liberal Enlightenment thought itself, which values what it conceives as the "natural" state of humanity, while recognizing a necessary development from the "savage" to the "civilized". It can be relocated in the perspective of colonial administrator ethnographers, who genuinely sought to understand local cultures by learning the language and studying people's oral history, while maintaining evolutionist ideas.

Faidherbe's case is important in as far as it exerted a lasting influence on a policy of the colonial administration designated as *politique de races* in which one sought to eliminate the domination of Muslim states through colonial conquest and to establish an administrative order based on small cantons, each made up of a few villages and a customary chief. It also has broader significance in as far as it illustrates a racial paradigm, which was common to other colonial powers[9]. Its underlying argument was that the State was not a characteristic feature of genuine negro-African societies, thus reproducing the fundamental anthropological distinction between kinship based and contractual societies. Wherever States could be found they were held to be the result of migrations and conquests made by foreigners who were usually identified with representatives of a hamito-semitic or "red" race. This race was held to be particularly gifted for warfare and endowed with advanced mental faculties, but also identified as religious fanatics and traitors. Both British and Belgian colonial authorities made use of this distinction when designating potential intermediaries for the maintenance of colonial rule.[10] The same was the case for Christian missionaries, who particularly focused on racially defined elites in their efforts to convert people.[11]

3. ETHNOGRAPHIC REASON AND THE HERITAGE OF COMPARATIVE NATURALISM

In order to understand the epistemological complex that left a lasting influence on thought on matters in Africa, it is important to bring such racial classifications in relation with what Amselle calls "ethnographical reason" (1998: 5). Inspired by the sociology of Emile Durkheim, the functionalist, fieldwork based ethnography, which started to emerge at the very end of the 19th century, was opposed both to evolutionist speculation and to theories of race. However, it can be argued that both evolutionist racial models of classification and ethnological categorizations along lines of ethnic, kinship and religious difference were

[9] The widespread presence of this explanatory framework may also relate to its long presence in the history of ideas. As Michel Foucault (1997) argues, the idea of a "war of races" between a more and lesser developed people (in the case of France, the Francs and the Gaulois) can be traced back to 17th and 18th century theories on the creation of the state,

[10] Examples are the administration of British Sudan by an "Arab" administrative elite to the detriment of "negro-African" southerners, and in Rwanda the use of Tutsi as intermediaries between the colonial administration and Hutu.

[11] Again the Rwandan case provides an exemplary case in as far as race and ethnicity were crucial elements "that affected missionary understandings of exactly who should be considered elite and, thus, who should be targeted for conversion" (Longman, 2001: 168).

inspired by the same underlying epistemology of 18th century comparative naturalism. In its most general sense such a method can be associated with Pierre Bourdieu's "scholastic logic" (1972), or with Jack Goody's "logic of writing" (1986). In each case, science proceeds by recording, organising and classifying phenomena in tables and thereby producing a basis for the advancement of knowledge through the comparison of distinct units. In ethnology such units of comparison are identified with ethnic groups or tribes. As Amselle notes, "in ancient Greece, the *ethnos* was conceived as an order opposed to the *polis* in as far as it lacked integration, self-sufficiency, and the division of labour" (1998: 6-7). We have already seen that such a dichotomy resurfaced in 19th century evolutionist theories of the development of societies from kinship based to territorial based organizations. The theoretical and practical consequences of such a division are crucial. In Amselle's terms the outcome of descriptions of societies in Africa and the development of colonial policies is a perspective in which "the spatial and the political are superseded by the temporal and the ethnic" (*ibidem*: 9).

A good entry point to understanding what this means is Johannes Fabian's critique of cultural relativism in his book *Time and the Other* (1983). Fabian argues that the relativist idea that cultures are different because they are separated by geographical distance actually implicitly translates into an argument about time. From the Eurocentric perspective of cultural comparison, the spatial distance of non-European cultures translates into a distance in time. One already finds this homology between distance in space and time in 18th century evolutionary models, such as the one drawn up by Joseph-François Lafitau in his *Mœurs des sauvages américains comparées aux mœurs des premiers temps* (1724). Here, as Amselle puts it, the author "proposes a vision in which modern primitives would be our contemporary ancestors" (1998: 9). In Fabian's terms, the consequence of this is that the non-Western other is not considered to be a contemporary of modern man. There is "a removal from a dialogic situation" and such a lack of "co-evalness" means they cannot communicate on equal terms (1983: 85-86).

Presenting knowledge about Africa as the knowledge of a series of distinct ethnic groups, which each have their particular features and modes of organization, means not only starting out by supposing that their internal organization is governed by kinship rather than territorial relationships, but, most importantly, ignoring how these units historically came into existence through their interaction in spatial terms. Placing people "out of time" (Thomas, 1989) means engaging in a pseudo-historical or substantialist perspective according to which understanding the truth about the organization of a group lies in identifying its origins, its purest and most authentic manifestations, or its "zero-degree" in Amselle's terms. Marcel Griaule's fieldwork on the West African Dogon, which was marked by a characteristic obsession for the authentic and a corresponding disinterest for

hybrid forms or acculturation, is symptomatic in this respect. It reflects a characteristic ethnological predicament of the first half of the 20th century in which research could only be conceived as either seeking to "salvage" what was left of non-Western cultures or of engaging in work on so called "culture change", which involved understanding how these societies were the more or less passive victims of destruction.

As already suggested, in terms of colonial policy this perspective translated into a method of government that considered colonial subjects in ethnic terms and as separate from a metropolitan and hence contemporary understanding of citizenship. As the characteristics of ethnic groups were understood either in terms of innate cultural features or as resulting from the influence of conquerors, no change from within was imaginable. Moreover, the colonial administration stressed the kinship based character of social relations, while reading it through the distinct authoritarian lens of a hierarchical structure of "commandment" (Mbembe, 2001). In this respect one also may perceive the limits of constructing continuity between science and policy. As Adam Kuper has shown in his discussion of the relationship between British anthropology and colonialism (1993) anthropologists were most of all interested in understanding the internal complexity of the groups they were studying and relating these to academic debates. While the ambition to codify customary law and thus provide a useful contribution to a functioning colonial administration did exist, surprisingly the authorities made relatively little use of this work. Seeking efficiency and quick results which were not necessarily to be gained by engaging in the intricacies of local practices, officials also distrusted ethnographers because of their closeness to their informants and their sympathy for them. It therefore might be useful to construct the relationship between knowledge and colonial policy in a more indirect fashion through the idea of a common epistemology that constructed ethnic societies by obliterating their spatial interaction – each group representing an integrated whole – and failing to recognize their historical nature. Here a final point has to be made about the weight of comparative naturalism. The latter had a decisive influence on functionalist sociology, whose prime interest was to understand how social cohesion comes about and how societies represent integrated wholes. Social structure could be compared to the morphology of organisms and the question of reproduction or socialization blotted out the question of internal conflicts and contradictions, which could lead to the need for decision making and historical change.

4. THE DECOLONIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE

I choose to highlight a perspective in which coming to terms with people in Africa basically meant coming to terms with their history and their political agency. Seen from the distance of more than half a century, a paradigmatic change in terms of what knowledge on

matters in Africa meant is inseparable from the process of decolonisation and the rise of a new political awareness among the colonised. The increasing criticism towards colonialism after the end of World War II, which was based on new standards to self-determination outlined in the Atlantic charter of 1941, also brought about a turn in colonial policy. In order to justify their continuing presence in Africa colonial administrations increasingly invested in infrastructure and public welfare and this also involved creating institutions involved in the production of applied knowledge, such as the *Office de la Recherche Scientifique et Technique Outre-Mer* (ORSTOM) with respect to the French colonies, founded in 1944, and the Rhodes Livingstone Institute in Lusaka, in the British case, which was established in 1938. The influence of communist parties in the metropolis and the colonies found its echo in the belated adoption of Marxist thought by sociology and anthropology.[12] The Manchester School of Max Gluckman, which developed its research program at the Rhodes Livingstone Institute, marked a gradual rupture with the functionalist paradigm in as far as it was interested in conflict as an integral part of social processes rather than as an anomaly. While the return to cohesion rather than historical change was still the main focus of Gluckman's work, studies conducted by himself and his students at the Rhodes Livingstone Institute also marked a more decisive break with ethnographic reason by abandoning the format of the monograph on the ethnic group. A new way of proceeding emerged, which has become known as the extended case study method. It dealt with understanding the encounter of different interest groups (*i.e.* members of the colonial administration, ethnologists, unionised workers, farmers, customary chiefs) in a specific historical situation, such as the inauguration of a bridge, or the struggles of workers to improve conditions in Rhodesian copper mines. Considering what was said earlier on about the features of ethnological reason, the rupture here was twofold, playing itself out both in terms of breaking up reified spatial units and introducing contemporary time shared by colonisers and colonised.

This perspective was also taken up in French anthropology through the work of the sociologist Georges Balandier and his concept "situation coloniale" (1951). As Balandier put it, this idea sought to avoid both searching for the ethnographically pure and to engage in technical applied research by addressing problems raised by the relationships between dominated people, who can speak through an "I" and the colonial administration (*ibidem*: 5-6). After decolonization in the early 1960s, in France this approach gave rise to a so called "dynamic anthropology" which sought to engage in a historically embedded analysis of social processes, often with a particular interest for comparisons in terms of

[12] We must consider that while the birth of sociology in the 19th century is closely related to the need of understanding the conflicts and contradictions arising from capitalism and finding remedies, its fundamental orientation was reformist or social-democratic rather than revolutionary.

Marxist categories such as modes of production or the distinction between capitalist and non-capitalist societies. However, as Amselle remarks, comparison in these terms continues to reify distinct social formations (*i.e.* hunter-gatherers *vs.* agricultural *vs.* capitalist societies) rather than analyzing the historical relations of these formations to each other (1993: 16). To mark a final break with the naturalist paradigm, what was seen to be distinct societies characterised as "state-building", "stateless" or "segmentary", should rather be analysed as interrelated parts of a shared continental or even intercontinental space (an "economy world" to use Immanuel Wallerstein's term). Emerging in the 1970s, this perspective anticipated globalization theory, while reacting to Braudel's, Wallerstein's and Samir Amin's work, by relating political and economic processes within networks of societies in Africa to "external" factors. In epistemological terms its final outcome was what Amselle calls "primordial syncretism" (*ibidem:* 29), referring to the axiomatic postulate that all societies are internally marked by a plurality of belonging and that their very existence is due to their interrelationship with contiguous social units.

This postulate also made the author become particularly interested in processes of "feedback", pertaining to the appropriation of Western knowledge by the societies, which were its object of representation. In concrete terms, this means understanding how ethnological reason was appropriated in the self-representations of people and by their political ideologies, but also examining how it has continued to structure Western representations of Africa in the postcolonial period.

As the work of French administrator-ethnographers and of functionalist anthropology illustrates, overcoming ethnographical reason does not simply mean inverting the devaluation of culture and society in Africa.[13] To the contrary, if we consider Achille Mbembe's discussion of "African writings of the Self" (2000), its characteristic effects of closure have continued to haunt precisely those representations which sought to liberate knowledge on Africa from its Western-centred bias. According to Mbembe three arguments mark these efforts: (1) "refuting Western definitions of Africa and Africans by revealing their falseness and bad faith"; (2) "denouncing what the West has made Africa endure (and continues to make it endure) in the name of such definitions"; (3) providing proof which seeks "to disqualify the African fictions of the West, to refute their pretention to monopolise the expression of the human in general and to open a space where the African could finally narrate to herself her own fables (autodefinition) in a voice that cannot

[13] One could here draw a parallel with Partha Chatterjee's analysis of anti-colonial Indian nationalism. While proposing a paradigmatic shift in as far as the latter advocated a valorisation of Indian culture and history, which had been denied by the colonisers, Chatterjee argues that Indian nationalism remained grounded in the same ideology as its Western counterpart.

be imitated because it is authentically hers" (*ibidem*: 17).[14] Mbembe argues that such endeavours are poised against "a kind of prison in which, even today, [African doxa] is struggling". The prison is made up of what is considered to be a historically singular condition of having been separated from one's self, expropriated, subjected and intellectually, as well as ontologically estranged through the heritage of slavery, colonization and apartheid and their masks race, geography and tradition.

Mudimbe's book *The Invention of Africa* seeks to confront this problem by suggesting that the decolonization of knowledge implies engaging with what he calls the "colonial library", rather than pursuing the illusion that one could escape from it by creating a form of counter-knowledge. In this respect, his work is an appraisal of the ways through which three major intellectual traditions (African writing in literature and in politics through the Negritude, black personality, and Pan-africanist movements; the emergence an "ethnophilosophy" inspired by the work of missionary-ethnographers; and an engagement with African history marked by new methodologies such as Jan Vansina's work on oral tradition and a critical reading of European models of African history) have sought to break with 19th century "primitivist strategies" (1988: 194). But, similar to the reflections of Amselle and Mbembe, it is also an enquiry into the extent to which these currents of thought have remained dependent on the presuppositions of the paradigm they set out to confront. Can we therefore say that in their sensibility for the epistemological problems involved in decolonizing knowledge, these authors offer a common framework for engaging with matters in Africa? Before addressing this final question, let us retrace the steps that brought us here.

CONCLUSION: COMING TO TERMS WITH THE WORLD IN AFRICA/AFRICA IN THE WORLD

As discussed in the introduction, understanding Africa as an object of knowledge has involved exploring the interrelationship between a series of ideas and historical contexts. I started out by presenting Mudimbe's discussion of the emergence of "Africa" as an idea and a metaphor leading back to early encounters during antiquity. We then saw how the second discovery of the continent in the 15th century drew from its descriptions in antiquity, while rendering the ascribed differences of its people compatible with the Christian idea of Genesis. As a result, in a static anthropology savages were placed within a natural order created by god in which representations of African others emphasized difference without necessarily associating it with negative values. Meanwhile, the emerging political-legal international order was clearly discriminatory in as far as people from Africa were denied the right to sovereignty.

[14] My translation.

Enlightenment thought introduced a new spatial-temporal framework which conceived human diversity as part of a secular movement of progress from the primitive to the civilized with Africans representing the earliest and most backward manifestations of the human species. In the 19th century modern science clearly evolved out of 17th and 18th century comparative naturalism and further specified the physical and mental inferiority of Africans within racial classifications. However, I argued that the place of Africa in modern science and colonial policy cannot be understood without considering a liberal political perspective which held that primitive Africans were the expression of a natural state of Man whose freedom had been curtailed by the slave trade and the rise of despotic states. Here colonialism represented the necessary corollary to the abolition of slavery, while its legal policies applied a socio-anthropological distinction between kinship status-based, apolitical societies, on the one hand, and political, contract-based ones, on the other hand. We have seen how the essentialist, apolitical and ahistorical tenets of comparative naturalism, referred to by Amselle as ethnological reason, have had a lasting effect by conditioning subsequent efforts to valorize culture and society in Africa. It is important here to emphasize that such representations have to a large extent continued to structure both Western and African ideas on culture, politics and development[15]. More generally, considering the changes in ideas on Africa leads me to stress continuing ambiguities between relativist/culturalist and universalist/evolutionist perspectives, rather than a sequence in which older paradigms are replaced by newer ones.[16]

Finally, breaking with the manifold expressions of ethnological reason involves reconsidering the positioning of the continent in time and space. Rather than describing social or geopolitical dynamics in terms of an interaction of self-contained compartments we consider how social processes are conditioned by spatial interactions on a local, regional, national, continental and global scale. Here spatial interrelatedness necessarily involves looking at historical interconnections and considering people in Africa as contemporaneous. As Fabian's concept of co-evalness suggests, such a double move in time and space creates the possibility for politics in the sense that people in Africa are involved in setting agendas, discussing them and participating in the making of decisions. While such a task of epistemic renewal and decolonization may be a long way from being

[15] While such phenomena cannot be discussed here, one could cite four recent examples: the elaboration of a scientific discourse on the existence of an African poetics, which associates literature from the continent with an underlying structure relying on orality (Basto, 2006); the emergence of a discourse on "African Renaissance" in the 1990's associating contemporary political and cultural innovation with the resurgence of a great civilisation (this discourse echoes the independence ideologies of African socialism); the speech of the French President Nicholas Sarkozy at Dakar's Cheikh Anta Diop University in which the speaker considered that Africans had yet to enter into history; and finally the instrumentalisation and manipulation of ethnic identities by governments in countries such as Kenya, Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Ethiopia and Mauritania.

[16] I follow here Michel de Certeau's critique of the tendency of historiography to reduce the complex historicity of social life to a succession of periods.

fully achieved, the consequences of placing Africa in the world also remain under discussion.

Amselle and Mbembe have both stressed the cosmopolitan integration of people in Africa, and in the case of Amselle, the extent to which Western and Arab-Muslim thought have defined the very terms through which people in Africa think of themselves. To the contrary, Mudimbe asks whether our discussion on the ways how Africans have been conceived through scientific discourses does "not obscure a fundamental reality, their own *chose du texte*, the primordial African discourse in its variety and multiplicity" (1988: 186). This question contains both a warning and an encouragement, which points at the extent to which thinking about the way we come to terms with the world in Africa/Africa in the world is still a work in progress. First of all it points at the necessity not to overestimate the impact of hegemonic projects and ways of thinking on society, suggesting that people in Africa have dealt with colonialism and all other subsequent states and development policies on their own historical terms. Secondly, it reminds us of the sheer intellectual and epistemological challenge for us "to relate in a more faithful way to *la chose du texte*", (…) "beyond the anthropological and philosophical categories used by specialists of dominant discourses" (*ibidem*). In this final respect, rather than thinking in terms of ways to leave behind the dominant categories of academic disciplines, the project of co-eval engagement provides us with the task of imagining spaces and forms of knowledge production where these concepts may engage with other ways of conceiving the world. Here we could cite Fabian's own ethnographic experiments with a Congolese theatre group, in which ethnography consists of writing about the unfolding of an investigative process within a theatre production seeking to respond to the anthropologist's questions about the meaning of the popular proverb "le pouvoir se mange entier" (1990). One could also evoke the ambitious concept/project of an "epistemology of the south", which was first outlined by Boaventura de Sousa Santos (1995) and has recently been systematized in an issue of the *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais* (Meneses, 2008). At stake here is the finding of ways to deal with epistemological diversity by confronting heterodox forms of knowledge from the south and the north with the academic disciplines that had previously been responsible for rendering them invisible.

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